

From: ["Bryan.David" </O=EXCHANGELABS/OU=EXCHANGE ADMINISTRATIVE:GROUP \(FYDIBOHF23SPDLT\)/CN=RECIPIENTS/CN=DE67FD66319E475AA76B7FB0C64D64B5-BRYAN.DAVID>](mailto:Bryan.David@EXCHANGELABS/OU=EXCHANGE ADMINISTRATIVE:GROUP (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/CN=RECIPIENTS/CN=DE67FD66319E475AA76B7FB0C64D64B5-BRYAN.DAVID)
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Hot Spot Near West Lake Landfill Raises Concerns

By Kevin Killeen

KMOX Radio St. Louis

September 13, 2013 4:00 AM - <http://stlouis.cbslocal.com/2013/09/13/hot-spot-near-west-lake-landfill-raises-concerns/>

ST. LOUIS—(KMOX)—An environmental group is warning a new underground fire could be forming at a Bridgeton landfill — closer to buried nuclear waste than the current fire.

The existing underground fire at the Bridgeton Sanitary Landfill was last reported about twelve-hundred feet from the West Lake Landfill nuclear site.

Now, the Missouri Coalition for the Environment is worried about elevated temperatures at a gas extraction well it claims is just 750 feet from the edge of the West Lake landfill.

“I think it changes things in a major way,” said Ed Smith, “I was already uncomfortable with this whole concept of luxury of time.”

Since this spring, the landfill owners, Republic Services Inc., have carried out a court-sanctioned plan to try to put out the underground fire in the south quarry. Public officials, including the Missouri Attorney General, have talked about having time, if necessary, to dig an emergency trench to separate the fire from the nuclear material before it ever gets too close.

“The possibility of a north quarry fire is more likely now than at any other time, based on the data we’ve seen,” Smith said.

Data from the Missouri Department of Natural Resources website shows the temperature at the well in question — Gas Extraction Well #54 — peaked at 155 degrees Fahrenheit on June 18. The past four weeks the temperature there has fluctuated between 143–146 degrees. Smith claims a temperature of 170 degrees would be considered an underground fire.

Landfill spokesman Richard Callow issued a statement:

“Every landfill everywhere contains decomposing material, which throws off heat. Gas Extraction Well-54, which is 1000-1200 feet from any radioactive material has historically exhibited somewhat elevated temperatures. It is currently trending down, not up. We agree with the Department of Natural Resource’s assessment of the data. Given contingency plans currently in place, there is no chance of an SSE [subsurface smoldering event] ever reaching material stored at West Lake. To argue otherwise is simply alarmist.”

Smith says when Callow claims the latest hot spot is 1,200 feet from the nuclear waste, he’s guessing at how far over the boundary line the nuclear waste lies buried.

“He can’t say with certainty where the nuclear material is buried, because he doesn’t know,” Smith said.

Smith says the possibility of a new fire starting closer to the nuclear material raises questions about whether firefighters would have enough time and space to keep it from spreading to nuclear material.

“The risk will be there that if a landfill fire hits the radioactive waste, you could have the possibility of smoke leaving the site, carrying with the wind and moving radioactive materials with the smoke and debris,” Smith said.

The Coalition for the Environment is calling on the Missouri Congressional Delegation to push for the complete removal of radioactive material from the West Lake Landfill. So far, Senators Blunt and McCaskill, and Congressmen Clay and Wagner have voiced “concerns” about the situation, but stopped short of calling for the removal of nuclear waste from the site.

The Missouri Department of Natural Resources did not return calls seeking comment on the story.